

Амано Акира • Amano Akira (eIDLIVE • Reborn!)Haneuma Stampede

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Deep within precipitous mountain cliffs, far from human civilization....

The sun had already sunk below the horizon, and in the forest, within a deep, expansive darkness unreachable by the light of the moon or stars, two beasts clothed in human form faced each other in combat.

There was a cracking sound, and a whip appeared, slicing through the darkness and biting into the weapon, a tonfaa, wielded by the boy with black hair.

"....."

In an instant the boy relaxed all the tension in his body.

There was not even a moment's delay.

"...."

He could faintly feel the movements of the whip's owner, whose own form was shrouded in darkness.

Without a trace of hesitation, the boy ran.

He ran in pursuit of his prey, swift, straight, and unfalteringly through the night, over narrow and wild mountain trails that a normal human would have found difficult to even walk along.

There was an impact.

"..kh."

Turning to face his attacker, the young man with reddish-brown eyes blocked the downswung tonfaa with a straining arm. And even as his brow knit into a grimace at the exertion and creaking of his bones, his mouth formed into a smile that suggested he was enjoying this.

"...you really don't go easy, do you?"

"Did you want me to?"

"Hah!"

Determinedly, the young man bent a long leg along the whip, and drove it toward the black-haired boy's flank. The boy calmly blocked the blow with a singly tonfaa. However, this, the young man had planned for. He used the recoil from the kick to get some distance and free his signature whip from the tonfaa.

But, before the space of a breath had elapsed the boy once more attacked. The young man rushed to face him, again swinging the black whip.

And even as each of their signature weapons made contact with the other's body, at the last moment they would avoid the vital organs, ensuring that no fatal wounds would be sustained by either. Scattering droplets of blood and sweat as they went, the closely matched struggle developing through bright movements, almost as if the two were dancing...

It was a rivalry of skills.

In the middle of a darkness which had fallen still as death, the fight between the two of them--

♪♪The green which trails after Namimori, Neither Large nor Small, rather Average ('Nami') is best♪♪

"....wha-?" The young man's shoulder slumped at the unexpected sound of the quiet melody.

With a calm expression, the other boy pulled out a cellphone and pushed the 'call' button.

"Hello?"

"...so that was your ringtone...." The interruption having thrown cold water over their fight, the young man lowered his whip with an expression of mild exasperation.

"Just as well. I was planning on wrapping up the training pretty soon. Romario."

As he said the words, directed behind him, a man in a black suit appeared suddenly from the shadow of the trees. He sported facial hair, and seemed to be older than the young man, but his attitude was respectful as he offered a towel.

"Good work, Boss."

"Ah." The young man accepted the statement as if it were a normal thing.

This man, called 'Romario,' was a member of the Chiavarone Family, part of the Mafia in Italy, far away from Japan. And the young man who was the recipient of their respect and loyalty was none other than the young 10th boss of the Chiavarone Family.

His name was the Bucking Horse, Dino.

Using a formidable black whip as his signature weapon, and possessing a power and charisma which seemed out of sorts with his youth, he was a person who had won recognition within the Underworld.

Of course, the black haired boy who had been fighting on even terms with Dino was formidable as well.

"Hey, Kyouya. At any rate, I think that's going to be all the training for now. I've got things to do, so I'll be going, but you should rest before—"

Beep.

The boy hung up and began to walk away without saying anything, his back turned towards Dino.

"Eh... hey, where are you going?"

In an instant, the boy had disappeared into the darkness of the night.

"...typical." Dino said, scratching his head in mild exasperation.

At this time Dino didn't know... That the black-haired boy's call had been from the School Discipline Committee at Namimori Middle, his school. That it had contained a report about a disaster occurring at his beloved school.

The boy's name was Hibari Kyouya.

The head of the school Discipline Committee, he loved Namimori Middle School more than anyone else, and he was more ruthless than anyone else. He was a person who loved battle, the strongest of the delinquents.

The Namimori Middle School building had now become the stage for one of the Underworld's disputes.

The battle for the Vongola Rings—

At stake was the position of successor as the boss of the Vongola Family, the foremost Mafia, even in Italy itself. Vying to take possession of the seven rings which stood as proof of inheritance, the two candidates and their subordinates would do battle every night.

Kyouya was fighting on the side of one of the candidates, Sawada Tsunayoshi, or 'Tsuna,' a close friend of Dino, and Dino had been carrying on his training for battle, after becoming a 'home tutor' of sorts.

As far as he was concerned, he'd have rather joined Tsuna as an ally and fought on his side, but because of the alliance between the Vongola and Chiavarone family, he couldn't show a preference toward one candidate over the other.

Training Tsuna's ally Kyouya felt like watching from the sidelines, but it was the absolute limit of the help he could give.

Come to think of it, Kyouya hadn't been told yet that the setting for this conflict would be his beloved school. Dino knew, but he'd been worried that Kyouya would ignore his training and go there on his own, so he had kept it a secret.

His fear had been justified, in that regard. Kyouya had taken off directly for Namimori Middle after being told about a disaster by one of his subordinates...but Dino wouldn't find out about that until he arrived at Namimori himself, one step behind.

"Still...he stayed a completely charmless, unmanageable brat until the end..." Dino sighed and rubbed his arm where the tonfaa had scored a direct hit.

Even if Dino hadn't been the teacher, surely anyone would have come to the same conclusion, that there could hardly have ever been another 'student' who gave such an impression of being uncontrollable. He never did as he was told, you never knew what he was thinking, and on top of all that, he had such an overflowing lust for battle that he'd come at his tutor, Dino, with genuine intention to kill.

"I suppose you've come to understand how Reborn felt, Boss."

"Huh?"

Reborn...that was the name of the home tutor who had once been responsible for giving Dino a special education in the ways of the Mafia. Though he was an exceptionally well-known assassin in throughout the Underworld, in the flesh he looked to be a "baby," and was, at any rate, a rather unconventional sort of person.

At the moment, Reborn was employed as Tsuna's home tutor. So, they had that connection as well, and Dino had become Tsuna's ally.

"How Reborn felt, huh...." Dino shrugged his shoulders a bit as he said it. "Don't even joke like that, It's not as if I was as much of a"

---Actually...

Dino's inner self protested the inaccuracy of his words.

He'd once been quite the problem child himself, though in a different way than Kyouya.

But, he'd changed.

A change sparked by that...unforgettable event.

(Romario...)

Dino looked at the man who was always by his side, advising him, his number one aide.

(No, it's not just Romario. Everyone in my Family believes in me. As long as they put their trust in me, I can continue to answer them. That's.....what I decided.)

Through his clothes, he lightly touched the tattoo that was inscribed on his left arm.

It was a vow.

From the time when he was still about Kyouya's age—when he had found the determination to become the Bucking Horse, shouldering the responsibility of the Chiavarone Family.

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